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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes representation of females in reading texts for children. Two theoretical approaches are contrasted that focus on one particular critique of gender representation in school reading materials, and a detailed, gender analysis is presented of "Story Chest," a graded reader, used in England since 1972 after successful use in Australia and New Zealand. Findings reveal that the content of textbooks still appears to be male and white-race dominated. Although "Story Chest" does present some minority groups, there is a gross under-representation of women and a stereotypical treatment of those who do appear as main characters, yet it is considered a good beginning. A model for non-sexist innovation in children's readers is presented. (Contains 26 references.) (NAV)

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"The Disqualified Half": Gender Representation in a Children's Reading Scheme

Simon Williams

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"The Disqualified Half": Gender Representation in a Children's Reading Scheme

Simon Williams

I first became interested in the representation of gender in children's reading schemes when looking for alternative texts to use in a pragmatic oral test. From various other published schemes, my investigations led me to *Story Chest* with its wide selection of readers and mix of fiction and non-fiction. It was only after spending two half days reading through the material that I realised how few women appeared in the texts. When they did it was often as witches, princesses, old women or housewives; apart from being somebody's sister, there were comparatively few girls. I decided to investigate their absence and its implications further.

In the first part of the paper, I will contrast two theoretical approaches to the issue of gender and language, focusing on one particular critique of gender representation in school reading materials. In the second part of the paper, I will present an analysis of gender representation in the *Story Chest* reading scheme, and suggest remedies which might also be applied to other schemes.

How far does the representation of gender in school materials help to create inequality and how far is it simply a mirror of society? Different theoretical approaches to this issue imply different answers. Cameron (1985) contrasts two such approaches: structuralist and determinist.

A pre-suffragette example of determinism is Mill's (1869) essay on "The Subjugation of Women":

> When we consider the positive evil caused to the disqualified half of the human race by their disqualification - first in the loss of the most inspiriting and elevating kind of personal enjoyment, and next in the weariness, disappointment, and profound dissatisfaction with life, which are so often the substitute for it; one feels that among all the lessons which men require for carrying on the struggle against the inevitable imperfections of their lot on earth, there is no lesson which

> they more need, than to add to the evils which nature inflicts, by their jealous and prejudiced restrictions on one another. Their vain fears only substitute other and worse evils for those which they are idly apprehensive of: while every restraint on the freedom of conduct of any of their human fellow creatures, (otherwise than by making them responsible for any evil actually caused by it), dries up *pro tanto* the principal fountain of human happiness, and leaves the species less rich, to an inappreciable degree, in all that makes life valuable to the individual human being. (in Robson 1984: 340)

Mill identifies men as the source of the "positive evil" without analyzing the particular social structures through which their power is perpetuated.

Linguistic determinists would say that changes in language affect social relations rather than *vice versa*. Cameron traces this theory to Lacan (and hence Saussure). Whorf and Sapir: the idea that language determines perception and thus reality – that "linguistic differences [determine] differences in world view" – is the basis of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Cameron 1985: 97). Spender (1980) takes this argument to its logical conclusion when she asserts that English is a man-made language (Spender 1980: 12).

A structuralist explanation for unequal representation of gender is offered by Hammond (1990), who suggests that as a species we are driven by "affective maximisation", or an inbuilt need for dependable, long-term affective gratification. In order to achieve this we have created stratification systems in which gender plays a vital role. Increasing social complexity reduces the need for some traditional forms of differentiation: in economically less advanced societies the gender behaviour of men and women is often sharply differentiated, eg in the extent to which a woman covers her body. A man's honour may be measured by the modesty of his wife or wives. Economically more advanced societies, on the other hand, provide the complexity by which gender becomes less important as a means of differentiation, affective maximisation being spread more widely and thinly. Both Karl Popper (1972) and George Kelly (1955) have a constructivist view of the nature of representation. For them, empirical

observations can only be made in the context of an existing theory: what is represented can only be understood through a theoretical paradigm rather than experience. New knowledge depends not on recognising that something is new but on the ability to create a new hypothesis which can include a new observation (see Mancini and Semerari 1988: 69-79). Thus, denying young readers the chance to evoke and identify with (especially) young female protagonists makes it difficult for them to form the concept that women can take initiatives, act assertively and lead lives independent of men. Without this concept, real instances which children, and later adults, may come across of women behaving like this may go unrecognised or be dismissed as exceptional. When, eventually, boys are forced to confront such instances, they may deny them, experience shock and then get angry.

Education is one area in which theorists and practitioners are assumed to be more aware and better informed on such issues. Careful thought goes into the preparation of classroom materials and teaching methodology; both are to a greater or lesser extent the result of original research. Yet, as the Anti-sexist working party (1985) points out, many books and resources are sexist in content and illustration, thus reinforcing stereotypes; furthermore, by the time children come to school they have already acquired a set of attitudes and expectations about what girls and boys can do (Anti-sexist working party 1985: 136). Perhaps neither of these observations need be surprising. Freud (1977) has written extensively on the very early psychosexual development of children; Illich (1971) has described schools as institutions of social control and has documented examples of their hidden agenda. Illich's thesis also offers the possibility of using education to effect change in what is often thought to be social rather than biological behaviour. How have the last two decades of increased gender awareness addressed these issues?

The content of education as measured by textbooks and other commercially-produced material still appears to be male, white dominated. Clarricoates (1987) refers to

> ... the school-book world with its sexist implications [which] reveals the implausible statistical ratio of twice as many boys than (sic) girls

> and seven times as many men than women, who are al[illegible] predominantly white and middle class. (Clarricoates 1987: 137)

Mahony (1985) reminds us of the many studies carried out on a range of children's literature. Three-quarters of the texts and pictures were found to contain the characters and images of boys and men, one-quarter girls and women. Men were depicted in four times as many occupations as women and expressed themes of achievement and ingenuity; women and girls expressed dependence and nurturance (Mahony 1985: 11). In recognition of the problem, the Schools Council Project Reducing Sex Differentiation in Schools 1981-1983 chose as part of its work to investigate sex bias in reading schemes, textbooks and teaching resources (Millman and Weiner 1985: 17).

Gilbert (1989) lists six research papers on reading materials in infant and secondary schools which have consistently pointed to (1) the different consideration girls and boys receive in such texts, (2) the paucity of adult female role models, (3) the stereotyping of female / male behaviours and activities. Gilbert cites these, together with documentation on classroom interaction, as evidence that language practices contribute to the construction of young women as a dominated and oppressed classroom group (Gilbert 1989: 257). She notes that

> Many of the texts girls read and write in classrooms serve to perpetuate, rather than challenge, patriarchal subject positioning of women. ... [They] encourage the construction of stereotypical female subject positions which limit women's understanding of their textual inscription and encourage them to see such inscription as "natural" and "normal". (Gilbert 1989: 263)

To remedy this situation, she suggests a number of techniques "which focus attention on language practices as socially constructed rather than personally expressed" (ibid):

1 genre theory coupled with a semiotic analysis of the constructed nature of genres to challenge the "naturalness" of language and language learning

2 feminist literary theory / feminist aesthetics, which have exposed the literary canon as "an arbitrary, phallocentric selection of material"

3 language and subjectivity: positions are learned as the result of taking up particular (gendered) positions in discourse - assertive, self-sacrificing etc.

Ord and Quigley (1985) advocate a similar commitment to open discussion in the classroom. Pupils should examine:

1 how many of the books are written by women

2 how many have women or girls as their main characters

3 how many contain examples of positive, well-balanced relationships between boys and girls

4 how mothers and fathers are portrayed.

They also suggest looking at particular books in detail and focusing on a book from the position of the female characters (Ord and Quigley 1985: 116). In principle, the solutions offered by Ord and Quigley and Gilbert may be possible as one-off lessons using a class reader, though it is hard to imagine Gilbert's being appropriate at primary school level; focusing on a specific text in this way is also more problematic with a reading scheme in which children are using different books.

Even when children are exposed to the possibility that girls can be proactive, assertive and independent, they may be unable to comprehend the situation. An interesting example of this is reported by Davies (1989) in the reaction of some pre-school children to a telling of *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch 1982). In their hearing of the story, the princess Elizabeth loses her prince not because she chooses to leave him (which she does) but because she is lacking virtue: "Most children believed Elizabeth should have cleaned herself up and then married the prince". Elizabeth thus becomes a "normal" princess who just got things a bit wrong (Davies 1989: 231).

It might be argued from this and other teachers' own experience, that girls do not mind reading stories in which boys are the main characters as much

as boys mind when girls take this role. Clarricoates (1987) refers to an interview with a primary school teacher:

> You can choose a subject interesting to the boys, the girls would be interested just as well, something like transport. But the other way around you often find boys are not very interested if it's not directed at them ... (Clarricoates 1987: 158)

It seems that this tendency for boys to prefer gender differentiation in children's books and class topics can be observed in more general behaviour. Barbara Lloyd (1989) reports that in two studies girls did not choose to use toys to mark their gender identities whereas boys avoided feminine toys and employed masculine toys to mark their membership of a gender category (Lloyd 1989: 62). However, as Lloyd points out, patterns of gender behaviour, action and feeling which may be confined to one gender are not necessarily biologically determined (Lloyd 1989: 61) and therefore the implication is that they are capable of change.

Let us now examine the representation of gender in a popular reading scheme. *Story Chest* began publication in this country in 1972 after initial success in Australia and New Zealand. It is a graded reader of "real" texts for primary school children and comprises twenty stages, starting with stories for beginner readers and developing through to mature paperbacks for children of 11+. There is also "Bridges", an additional 18 small books between Stages 1 and 2, comprising stories, mini-anthologies and non-fiction; and Selection Box (20 books). The publicity material stresses the absence of artificiality:

> ... these are real stories, plays and rhymes ... non-competitive and non-sexist ... [with a] wide variety of themes which appeal to children. (E J Arnold, publisher)

The cover of this brochure shows a picture of a boy riding the crest of a wave on a giant swordfish. Not a girl in sight! Titles are still being added to the collection so that *Story Chest* now spans twenty years during which gender representation has developed as an issue. Yet the number of stories about women is still far from being equal. Indeed, for that to happen, 133

new titles in which women were the central characters would have to be added.

Procedure

To compare the visibility of female and male protagonists in *Story Chest*, the gender of the "theme" (Brown and Yule, 1983: 135) in each text was assigned to one of four categories: Female (F), Neuter (N), Plural (P) or Male (M). In fiction texts, one, two or more main characters of the same sex were coded as M or F as appropriate. Two or more characters of mixed sex were coded as P. Animal stories in which the characters were not anthropomorphized, ie where the animal was always referred to by its common name and not by a proper name or male or female personal pronoun, were coded as N. Non-fiction texts were treated in one of three ways: (1) if it took the form of biography, eg Lady Godiva, it was coded as for fiction; (2) if the text provided information on non-human matters, eg plants or volcanoes, it was coded as N; (3) games, puzzles and instructions, eg making party masks, were not coded (but "Mr Davies makes baskets," Bridges collection C, was coded as M). Each text in an anthology, fiction or non-fiction, was given a separate coding, so a collection of folk tales like "Around the World" (Stage 10) might receive seven separate codings. All texts published to date were coded, ie all books in the twenty Stages plus "Bridges" and "Selection Box". A total of 243 books were analyzed in this way. See Table 1.

Results

Figure 1 omits neuter and plural codings to emphasise the contrast between female and male characters. In only one case (Stage 16) are there more single female protagonists than males; elsewhere single male protagonists outnumber females by as many as 9:1 ("Selection Box"). Overall, where we might expect an equal ratio to reflect the biological number of women and men, in *Story Chest*, after assigning the plural counts to each sex in turn, it is 3(M):2(F); looking at single protagonists alone it is more than 2:1. The rank order of the four codings in Table 2 shows that none of the three non-female codings is less than the female:

Table 1: Analysis of sex and gender in *Story Chest*

	Text theme			Author	
Level	Female	Plural	Neuter	Male	Female	Male
1	8	13	13	14	96	0
Bridges	6	5	0	7	12	6
2	3	3	2	3	9	0
3	1	8	5	2	11	0
4	2	4	6	4	12	0
5	3	6	9	5	9	0
6	2	8	1	10	12	0
7	7	5	0	7	12	0
8	9	1	2	14	6	3
9	2	4	8	12	5	4
10	2	5	10	8	7	6
11	3	2	6	17	3	6
12	3	3	9	12	5	6
13	4	2	6	12	5	6
14	4	2	8	14	5	6
15	8	3	5	11	4	6
16	15	6	9	14	3	8
17	3	4	8	16	7	7
18	6	7	8	9	4	7
19	2	2	14	12	2	8
20	6	6	0	13	8	6
Selection Box	2	2	1	18	11	8
TOTALS	**101**	**101**	**130**	**234**	**234**	**93**

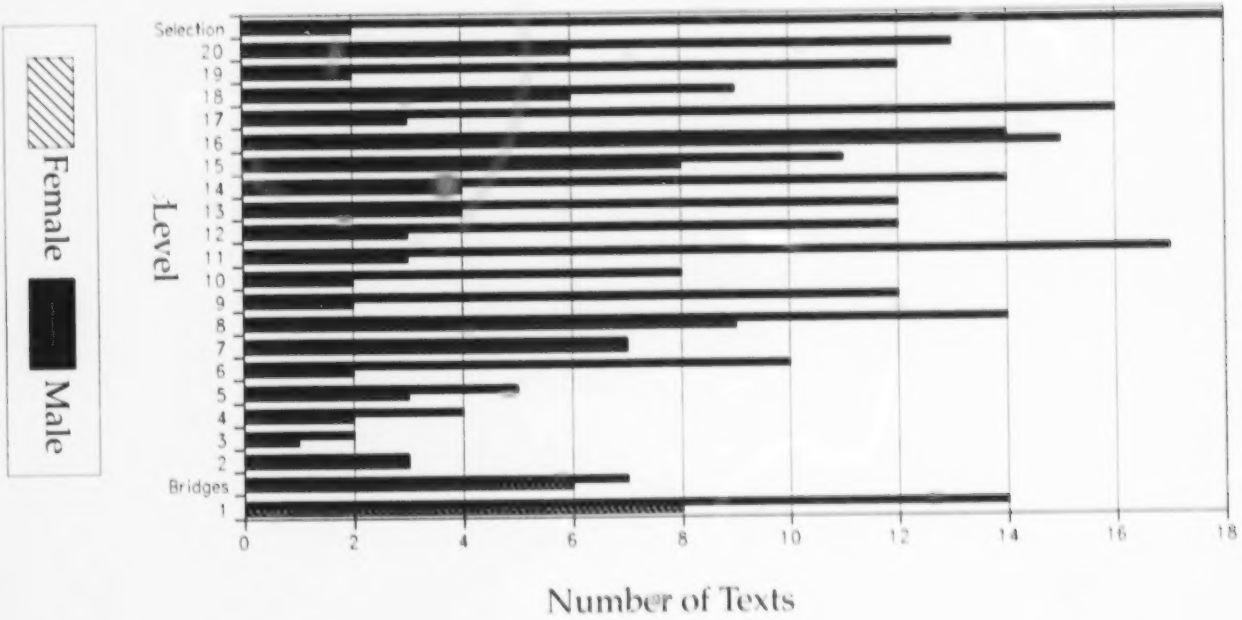
Table 2: Rank order of text theme gender

F: 101
P: 101
N: 130
M: 234

Total: 566

Figure 1

Story Chest: Gender of Themes



Analysis of Story Chest authors by sex

Authors were assigned to a Male or Female category once per book. The results were surprising. Authors for the first seven levels were exclusively female with Stage 1 alone comprising 96 women (all 48 books were written by two authors). However, male authors outnumber female in Stages 10-16 and 18-19. Here, one might infer more complex structural workings, eg women being associated with caring for infant children and men enjoying the prestige of writing for an older audience. The overall ratio is more than 2(F):1(M).

Cross-tabulation

There is some evidence of an inverse relationship between sex of author and ratio of female to male characters in particular Stages, eg in Stage 16 (the only one in which female characters outnumber males) there are nearly three times as many male authors: 3(F):8(M). On the other hand, Stage 1 (8(F):14(M) characters) is written exclusively by women: 96(F):0(M). Incidentally, both non-sexist children's books recommended by Ord and Quigley (1985) are written by men: *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch 1982) referred to earlier and *All the King's Horses* (Foreman 1976).

Comment

Story Chest does indeed portray some minority groups sympathetically, with representative characters in peripheral rather than main roles. This is especially so in the plays, eg "Terri", which concerns a mixed race family, one of whose children is paraplegic. There remains, however, a gross under-representation of women and a stereotypical treatment of some of those who do appear as main characters. For example, "The Playground" (Mahy 1986) is the story of how Lynnette, who is too afraid to play with the other children on the swings and roundabouts, is eventually tempted to try at night by some mysterious childlike-figures emanating from seagulls. She finds the experience addictive and becomes more daring than her friends. It is a pity that this story is not about a boy who is afraid to play and that, rather than personally chosen, the solution is externalised, a kind of *deus ex machina*.

There is the family who waits for dad, the "Big Tease", to return with supper after the football match, the woman holding the baby (Cowley and Melsor 1982). For a few hilarious moments, the Big Tease pretends he has forgotten all about it: "I like to see you get mad," he tells mum, before handing over take-aways and a box of chocolates. Mum and the children are very much the passive recipients of largesse from this bearded patriarch. However much this may reflect children's real experience of home life - father going out for the evening while everyone else stays at home, clearly identified as the provider and therefore having the power to manipulate (teasing is one manifestation of these unequal relations) - the job of challenging such sexist behaviour is left to someone else (the teacher, mum, dad!?).

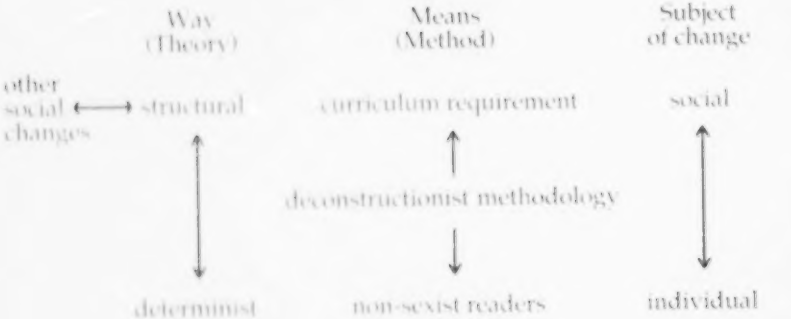
Even in the socially aware play, "Terri", (Foot 1987), it is dad who does the exterior decorating, while mum cooks the meal, looks after their disabled daughter, and organises activities for the other children. So what's new? I hear you say. Well, evidently not the characters in *Story Chest*.

Many structuralists would maintain that such differences in gender representation reflect rather than create social inequality and that changing representation, eg having more girls and women as central characters and depicting more assertive behaviour, can only have a transitory effect. In one way or another, they advocate changing social structures as the way to create non-sexist behaviour and achieve equal relations between men and women. They would claim that the introduction of legislation such as the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) is more important than attempts to change how gender is represented in reading schemes. In the end, they would say, this approach is more likely to influence people's attitudes and behaviour.

Whether one advocates individual change or change in social structures, both imply a role for classroom teachers. It is hardly conceivable that the majority of pupils in a sexist society will by themselves develop the self-awareness to recognise literary stereotypes and the under-representation of women and girls. Davies (1989) has suggested how children of both sexes have far too much invested in present gender divisions.

The dissemination of a new methodology will not be sufficient without new materials. The publication of non-sexist materials alone will be ignored by many schools unless (i) they carry the patriarchal stamp of authority, eg they are required reading for a SAT Test (ii) the teacher understands and is committed to active intervention and deconstruction of texts in class discussion. Both determinist and structural theories would inform each other in a combined solution:

Figure 2: Suggested model for non-sexist innovation in children's readers



As a start, a number of teachers interested in this issue could compile their own alternative reading schemes, possibly making use of non-sexist children's books recommended by such organisations as the Letterbox Library (see Appendix) and, to estimate level, one of the many readability formulae. As teacher/authors they could write their own materials, or edit anthologies, and combine resources to bombard publishing houses with the results. There are plenty of examples of teacher/authors in *Story Chest*. Lastly, there is no shortage of materials to collectively deconstruct in the classroom. The *Story Chest* texts discussed above would make a good beginning.

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Appendix

The Letterbox Library is a group of women committed to making non-sexist and multi-cultural books for children more widely available. A regular newsletter and list of titles are available for a £5 subscription from:

Letterbox Library
Unit 2D, Leroy House
436 Essex Road
London N1 3QP
Telephone: 071 226 1633
Fax: 071 226 1768

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